The Gaze as Signifier:

Induction Puzzles and the Islamic Eye

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“-Do you drink regularly or occasionally?

-Well, I do drink occasionally, but the occasion do come regularly!”

The concept of the gaze is conventionally understood as the subject’s destabilizing awareness of being seen by an Other: a mosltly disturbing awareness that shatters the imaginary wholeness of the *knower “centered around the function of narcissism or the mirror stage.” (*cf. the very beginning of Session 17, Seminar XIII*)*. Yet, if one follows Lacan carefully, the gaze does not arrive late in psychic life. It is not a secondary disruption after identity has been securely formed. Rather, the gaze is there from the beginning, amalgamated with the signifier, woven into the very constitution of the subject as it enters language and accordigly the mirror stage, where it visits its proper name in the mirror.

This article argues that the mirror stage is already the first real entrapment in the gaze; second, to show that the gaze is inseparable from the signifier, such that *being seen* and *being named* are structurally the same *operation*; and third, to unfold this structure as an *induction puzzle* — a paradox that constitutes subjectivity by posing insoluble questions such as: *If I am there, who is here? If I am here, who is watching me?*

The subject could never be simply arrested as“itself.” It is always already caught in the gaze of the Other, held after the mirror stage within a paradox that spans an entire life.

Having established this paradox in Lacanian terms, I will then move to contrast it with the Islamic cultural elaboration of the gaze. In Islamic thought and practice, the subject is not only haunted by being seen by the Other in a symbolic sense, but also literally and continuously observed (mostly from above) — by God, by despotic authority, and by the envious gazes of other humans (=evil eye). The architectural form of *muqarnas* makes this visible, fragmenting the gaze of authority into a thousand eyes. The *nazar* (evil eye) condenses this logic of visibility into a spiritual hazard: one’s luck, one’s very survival, is determined by the gaze of others in its arbitrary and dangerous modality.

The final aim is ethnological and ethnotopological: to show how gaze, as a universal structure of subject-formation, takes different cultural forms — in Lacanian psychoanalysis as paradox, in Islamic cosmology as arbitrariness.

The Mirror Stage as Gaze

Lacan's theory of the mirror stage is often described as the child's recognition of its own reflection as a coherent whole. Between six and eighteen months, the infant identifies with the image in the mirror, experiencing jubilation at a mastery it does not yet possess. The mirror stage is thus the formation of the ego as an *imago* — an ideal of unity that the subject will forever pursue but never attain.

What is often missed, however, is that this moment is already a moment of gaze. The child does not simply look at the mirror and recognize itself. The image also looks back. The jubilant moment is already underwritten by an alienating structure: *I am seen where I can(not) see myself.* The mirror does not simply reflect, it constitutes a paradoxical field of/for visibility that entraps the subject.

From this perspective, the mirror stage is not just about identification but about being seen. The ego is born not only by taking the image as one's own but by being caught in the loop of vision: the subject sees itself being seen. In this sense, the first entrapment in the image is also the first entrapment in the gaze. This is why the mirror stage can be read as an induction puzzle. If the child says, "*That is me*," then who is here, looking at the image? If the child says, "*I am here*," then who is that in the mirror? The subject is constituted through this paradoxal place in which "I" gazes at "me."

Gaze = Signifier

The entrapment in the gaze does not happen only through visual images. It happens linguistically. The child is called by its proper name countless times before it ever utters it. Each time the name is spoken, the subject is summoned into a place in the symbolic order. *To be named is to be seen*, to be *interpellated* into the field of the Other.

This is why the gaze and the signifier are inseparable. To be gazed upon is not merely to be looked at; it is to be positioned in a network of signifiers, to be recognized, labeled, inserted into language. The proper name functions like the mirror image: *it is me, and yet it is not me*. It is an image or sound that precedes me, an external signifier that I must inhabit.

Thus, we can say: **gaze = signifier.** Both are forms of visibility, both are external positions that "I" occupy only at the cost of alienation. When Lacan and his commentators constantly employ perspective, angles, and points of view, it is not because they are metaphors but because psychoanalysis itself is structured by this equivalence. The gaze is linguistic; the signifier is visual. Together they form the paradoxical medium in which the subject emerges.

The Gaze as Induction Puzzle

The statement "I am seen where I can(not) see myself" should not be read as a descriptive phrase. It is, instead, a formulation that constitutes the subject by means of an impossibility. The mirror stage already illustrates this paradox. The

infant recognizes the image as “me,” but this me is located elsewhere, in a place where “I” can(not) be: toggling infinitly being being and nonbeing. The ego is founded on this very fundamental (mis)recognition.

This splitting is not confined to the mirror stage. It persists throughout life. Each time I am seen by another, the paradox is reactivated. Identity as (mis)recognition (I=me) is caught between being the one who sees and the one who is seen, between Word and Flesh.

Other Lacanian formulas also share this paradoxical structure. The famous claim *“the woman does not exist”* is not a denial of women’s reality, but a statement about the impossibility of representing sexual difference within the symbolic order. Yet by declaring that “*the woman does not exist*,” Lacan inscribes her existence in the very space of impossibility. Similarly, the liar’s paradox — “*I am lying*” — indexes truth by negating itself.

Isn’t gaze functioning in the same way? It holds the subject in an unresolved paradox that lasts a lifetime. Desire is eternal, never fulfilled: the subject is constituted by a riddle that cannot be solved, only repeated. The gaze, therefore, is not an occasional disruption but the very structure of subjectivity: a life-long induction puzzle.

The Islamic Gaze

Islamic culture situates it in a theological and architectural register. Here, too, the gaze is never neutral. To be visible is to be vulnerable. The Qur’an itself articulates this in Sūrat al-Qalam (68:51–52):

> Indeed, the faithless almost devour you with their eyes
> when they hear this Reminder, and they say, ‘He is indeed
> crazy.’ Yet it is just a reminder for all the nations.

Exegetes read this as an instance of nazar — the evil eye. The unbelievers, filled with envy and hostility, looked upon the Prophet Muhammad with such intensity that their gaze threatened him with destruction. Harm here does not proceed from physical violence but from the gaze itself. It is a force, an emanation of envy, capable of inflicting illness, misfortune, or even death. The *Wa In Yakād* verse above became a protective sign across Islamic cultures. Written on plaques, recited in prayers, or inscribed at the entrance of houses, it shields the believer from hostile eyes.

An Islamic wall amulet combining Qur'anic verses of *Wa In Yakād* with the protective blue glass eye (*nazar boncugu*), reflecting the convergence of scriptural invocation and folk belief in guarding against the evil eye.

Ceramic tile inscribed with the *Wa In Yakād* verse, among the most widely used verses in Islamic domestic decoration. Commonly displayed at the entrances and interiors of houses, these inscriptions are believed to protect inhabitants from the evil eye while serving as both ornament and spiritual reminder.

For Islam, the gaze is not only the register of/for Symbolic but efficacious: it is capable of transmitting real harm. It is not merely a psychological structure but blended with spiritual danger. This gaze is not limited to interpersonal relations. It is also cosmological and political. In the Islamic imagination, God is the ultimate Seer: *Allāh baṣīr* بصير الله— God is All-Seeing. This produces a permanent condition of visibility: the subject is always already under the divine gaze. In political life, this gaze is mirrored by the despot or ruler, whose authority is often architecturally represented. The *muqarnas,* the honeycomb-like ornamentation of domes and ceilings, refracts the gaze into a thousand eyes looking down upon the subject. The architectural space itself embodies the experience of being constantly observed from above. Thus, the Islamic gaze emerges as a lived and spatialized reality.

Muqarnas dome in the Mausoleum of Zumurrud Katun, late Abbassid period.The honeycomb-like ornamentation fragments light and perspective into countless facets, evoking the multiplicity of eyes gazing from above. In Islamic architecture,

such forms materialize the sense of divine and political surveillance, embodying the subject's condition of being perpetually observed. In Islam, architecture is literal — domes, *muqarnas*, eyes from above. The space of vision is inscribed materially into the built environment.

Luck, Arbitrariness, and the Phantasy of Control

The gaze in both Lacanian and Islamic registers is bound to questions of luck and contingency. To be seen is to risk exposure to forces beyond one's control. However, the human phantasy allows the subject to imagine that their will has some purchase on fate: an attempt to suture the paradox of the gaze, to believe that the subject can master what in truth masters it. Protective rituals — carrying a charm, knocking on wood, pressing the button of elevator more than once, pressing an even unconnected button — are defenses against the primordial induction puzzle of *being seen*. To recite the *Wa In Yakād* verse, to inscribe it on a plaque, to invoke God's name — these are occasions that believer presses the button, but the efficacy is *real* because the only operator of this mechanism of/for Luck is God himself. This is why luck and unluck in Islam cannot be reduced to secular superstition. They are modes of divine decree (*qadar*). Harm from envy, protection from supplication, blessing from God — all are mediated through the gaze. The gaze is thus the channel through which arbitrariness is lived: one's fate can shift not only because of deeds but because of how deeds are seen by others and by God.

Conclusion

Beginning from the proposition that gaze is present from the very beginning, inseparable from the signifier, we have seen that subjectivity is constituted by an induction puzzle. The mirror stage shows that the ego is born in the paradox of seeing oneself elsewhere; the signifier shows that to be named is already to be seen. Lacan's gaze, therefore, is not occasional but structural, a life-long riddle that binds the subject to desire.

Placed in dialogue with Islamic thought, this gaze takes on a new form. The *nazar* demonstrates that to be seen is to risk harm. The *Wa In Yakād* verse registers the power of hostile eyes; architecture such as *muqarnas* enacts the experience of being permanently watched from above. Luck and unluck, protection and harm, arbitrariness and divine decree — all are mediated through the gaze.

The ethnotopological conclusion is this: the gaze is a universal structure of subject-formation, yet one that is differently inscribed across cultural worlds. In Lacan, it appears as paradoxical, linguistic, and symbolic; in Islam, as cosmological, arbitrary, and spiritual. Both, however, converge on a single truth: the subject is never simply itself. It is always already seen, always already named, always already constituted — not within the field of the Other's gaze, but within the field of the Other as gaze, the field of Es = S = Signifier.